

# The River Ver and Abstraction by Andy Webb, August 2024

## Chapter 3: Middle Reaches

"The population's habit is to grow  
In every region where the water is low"

A.P. Herbert

As the 20th century progressed, new housing and industrial areas were needed for the increasing population. New Towns were developed, and established ones increased in size and modernity. Importantly, increasing affluence brought per capita increase in consumption of water. In the aftermath of WWII in particular, the need for new housing brought the need for additional sources of potable water. But the effects of increasing abstraction from deep boreholes in Hertfordshire was, even then, being noted and highlighted.



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*What Is Happening To Our Trout Streams?* was the title of an article in *Hertfordshire Countryside* magazine, in the Autumn 1948 edition:

"Although never so famous as those of Hampshire, the trout streams of Hertfordshire always have been noted for the excellence of their trout" (G. Dewar, 1898).

"But what a change the years have wrought. All these streams are dead or dying . . . once so full of bright life and teeming with their trout, gradually have they succumbed, until nothing remains of most of them but a trickle of dirty water idling along a narrow muddy ditch . . ."

"Truly have the chalk streams of Hertfordshire paid the price for continued deep well pumping, extensive schemes of misguided land drainage and river dredging, and the efforts made to get to the sea every shower of rain as quickly as possible."

The 1951 *Survey Report and Analysis of [Hertfordshire] Development Plan* highlighted this problem too. In its *Public Utilities/Water Supply* section, County Planning Officer Mr E.H. Doubleday states:

"For many years now the subsoil water level in London has been falling and it is common knowledge that the same trend is apparent in Hertfordshire, where the sources of streams and rivers have moved considerably down their valleys during the lives of the present residents. All this points to one thing - that more water is being extracted by pumping from the subsoil of the London Basin than is percolating into it from the rainfall upon the limited chalk areas on the 'rim'".

He goes on to note the "new bore-holes to provide an improved supply for Luton are being sunk at Flamstead" (i.e. Friars Wash Pumping Station, opened with some fanfare by Enoch Powell, Minister of Housing, in 1956).

The Lee and Colne Valley water companies initially proposed to hugely increase their abstraction in the Upper Colne and Ver valleys in the aftermath of WWII, as noted earlier. A three-day public inquiry was held in Luton in 1951 to assess the applications. It is interesting to note here that giving evidence against the application at the inquiry was Mr Fred Kellard, then chairman of St Albans & District Industrial Employers Association. Initially the Inspector ruled against the water companies' plans, as they would be "totally damaging". But the Inspector was overruled.

Thirty years later, Mr Kellard said that at the time of the inquiry it was intimated to him that the President of General Motors in America telephoned the then Prime Minister and implied that, if the Ver (Friars Wash) water was not forthcoming for the company's Vauxhall truck plant in Dunstable and car plant in Luton, then he would take the whole operation to Germany! This claim cannot be substantiated.

So the 1940s and 1950s brought significant increases in groundwater abstraction, both for the increasing population and increasing consumption per person, and with it increased attention focusing on catastrophic consequences to the riverine environment in Hertfordshire, and the River Ver in particular.

When the Luton Water Company proposed sinking additional boreholes north of St Albans at Butlers Farm/Bow Bridge to augment its other supplies, they were met with ire from the town and from the wider area.

The idea had been put forward by the Water Company two years previously. Subsequently, two reports by eminent hydrogeologists were published: firstly by Professor O.T. Jones of Cambridge University, in August 1956; and secondly by H.C. Bowen, Chief Engineer, Thames Conservancy, in

May 1957. These stated that test-pumping at the new site had quickly lowered the level of groundwater in the immediate vicinity, thus highlighting the effects of long-term abstraction. Despite this, the Water Company made an official application to Government for a licence to abstract up to 5 million gallons a day from Bow Bridge Pumping Station (PS). An article in the *Herts Advertiser* at the time was headlined "A Grave Threat to St Albans' Water Supply - City and Rural Councils Alarmed About Luton Raid On Ver Valley".

So alarmed were the Aldermen and Councillors of both the City and Rural District Councils that a public meeting was called to inform and galvanise local opinion against the proposals, ahead of a Public Inquiry planned for that summer. Central Government would be the ultimate arbiter. Local concern focused particularly on the effects on the health of the Verulamium Lakes, which had been constructed with much fanfare in 1930/1, and which relied entirely on siphoned off river-water for their maintenance.

The meeting was held on the evening of 8th February 1958 at the Assembly Room of the Old Town Hall in St Peter's Street. Such was the level of interest that 1,000 people turned out for the event, most of whom had to stand outside listening to the proceedings via loudspeaker. "A small river became a large issue" wrote the *Herts Advertiser* newspaper in its following edition. Indeed national press, radio and television also reported the meeting, ahead of the event and after it.

There were three notable speakers against the Luton Water Co proposal. Lord Verulam called it "a startling, scheming, stinking, stupid stratagem". Eminent archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler (who had overseen the extensive excavations of Verulamium ahead of the construction of the park and lakes in the early 1930s) said that St Albans was one of the most venerable cities in the land, and that "nowhere within 20 miles of Hyde Park Corner was there a landscape so beautiful as that at Verulamium. This threat is a very grave one indeed, and I would describe it as wanton and frivolous". Chief Engineer of the Thames Conservancy Board (a forerunner of today's Environment Agency), the aforementioned Col. H.C. Bowen, opposed the proposal on two main grounds: "first, that the valley of the Ver was incapable of supplying the quantity of water that was required; and secondly, that quantity of water for the promoters' purpose would lay the River Ver dry . . . it just can't be done". The mayor, and representatives of various local groups, also spoke against, one calling it "sheer piracy".

So, the tone of the meeting was unequivocal: Luton - hands off our water! It was also noted at the time (which made the situation worse) that the exported Ver valley water would ultimately, after use and treatment at East Hyde Sewerage Treatment Works south of Luton, be returned to the River Lea – thus, at times, 50% of that river would be River Ver water! (Note also that the water abstracted from beneath St Albans today is exported to the River Colne via Blackbirds Farm Sewerage Treatment Works near Aldenham, and thence to Maple Lodge STW near Rickmansworth.)

A council committee consisting of a cross-section of all local interests, including the Mayor, was established to co-ordinate actions to fight the plans, ahead of and during the Public Inquiry pencilled in for the summer. In a sense, this event set the tone for subsequent decades; in November 1976 the Ver Valley Society (VVS) was formed to continue the fight to stop the Ver dying.

It is worth noting here too a proposal which had circulated since WWII, of creating a new reservoir in the valley of the River Ouse in Cambridgeshire, which would ultimately take the form of Grafham Water (opened July 1966). This will play a part in the history of the River Ver, but more of this later.

The Public Inquiry began on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1958, and once again took place in the Assembly Room of the Town Hall. The intervening months of campaigning and highlighting by the City Council had led to a petition of locals against the Luton Water Order, amounting to 14,000 names. This was presented to the Inquiry, along with the 81 formal objections.

Because of the amount and complexity of evidence, the Inquiry, initially scheduled for five days, ultimately had to be extended to a total of eight days, ending on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> June. The febrile atmosphere surrounding the proceedings did, however, lead to Luton Water Co representatives and City Council Engineer/Surveyor Albert Moody beginning behind-the-scenes discussions about some sort of compromise solution, which could be suggested to the Inspector and ultimately the Government Minister.

In the aftermath of the Inquiry these discussions were considered to have borne fruit, for when the Minister announced his decision just before Christmas 1958, it was only in partial favour of the Water Company's plans. Firstly, they would only be licensed to abstract a maximum 2.5 million gallons per day (ordinarily 1.5 million per day). Secondly, "protective measures" would be put in place specifically for Verulamium Park Lake (but note – for the purely amenity value of the park, not necessarily for the health of the River Ver as a whole). The Minister stated that waiting for the promulgated Ouse valley reservoir would take too long and be too expensive. So the chalk aquifer - that "free" reservoir - was to be plundered once again. Natural resources for human consumption were thought to be paramount and, despite growing evidence that such developments led to environmental degradation, were to be carried through without heed or hindrance, regardless of the consequences.

From this, in effect, sprang the local interest group, following the droughts of the early 1970s and the severe drought of 1976 in particular. That summer, with over-abstraction (69% of any recharge) and low rainfall, the Ver dried up for three quarters of its entire length, down to Park Street Mill, just a mile or two from its confluence with the River Colne. The Ver Valley Society established itself at the end of that year.

The Minister's decision, then, published in December 1958, did mitigate somewhat the damage that might follow to the riverine corridor. As well as allowing only about one fifth of the daily abstraction rate requested, "protective measures" applied. This took the form of "compensation water", to be supplied into the River Ver north of Verulamium Lake at times of low flow in the river, so that at least some water would flow into the paddling pool/boating lake, and thus replenish the main lake.

Locally, this was regarded as a victory, even if it later seemed a Pyrrhic one. Councillor Baum had read the Minister's decision "with some satisfaction".

The decision, he said, had left the Luton Water Co with a little more than a fifth of their original demand:

"This shows that our opposition was sound, well presented by the various objectors, and has been effective. We realised from the very early stages that the Minister's position was a difficult one, due to his predecessor having given permission for a large increase of houses on the Luton border before their water supply was assured. I note also that the Minister considers that the amount he is now able to authorise may make the Company's scheme an uneconomic proposition, and I hope that they may find it possible to meet their demands elsewhere than the Ver valley."

Asked by the *Herts Advertiser* to comment on the Government's decision, the Luton Water Co gave a frosty "no comment. We are giving the matter consideration".

Discussions between City Surveyor/Engineer Albert Moody and Lee Valley Water Co representatives, regarding compensation water for the Verulamium Lakes in periods of low flow in the Ver, did bear fruit. It was agreed to implement a scheme for a new water-supply pipe between the new Pumping Station, a mile to the north, and St Michael's Bridge. If flow in the Ver fell below 1 million gallons per day at St Michael's Bridge, 225,000 gallons per day would be pumped to the river at the Bridge via the new pipe, so that water levels in the lakes at least could be maintained to some degree.

Ironically, despite the Minister's assertion in 1958, Grafham Water reservoir in the Ouse valley between Bedford and St Neots, constructed to supply the New Town of Milton Keynes plus parts of Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, was opened in 1966, a year before Bow Bridge PS was brought online. Nonetheless, Grafham Water was subsequently to play a significant role in our story in following years. Compensation water for Verulamium Park Lakes was to be provided through the new pipeline from Bow Bridge following protracted negotiation and design work, including two new river-flow monitoring gauges within the park: the first on the Abbey millstream, near the bridge which divides the two lakes; and the second opposite the Fighting Cocks public house, by Abbey Mill itself.

**For References, Source Material and Acknowledgements:** see Section 6 on the website.



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The Old Pumphouse, Stonecross



Dried-up river, Shafford Mill, late 1980s



Top/Settling Lake, Verulamium Park, drained and desilted, dry Summer/Autumn (2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005)



New water pipes at The Cricketers, junction of Stonecross, Harpenden Road, Avenue Road, St Peter's Street, Summer 2022



Sinking of a modern borehole/well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, near St Albans





Friars Wash Pumping Station, River Ver, August 1994